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ABSTRACT

English for specific purposes (ESP) coursebooks compiled by writers in the People's Republic of China are described. Eight textbooks are examined focusing on their common features in terms of reading passages, reliance upon Chinese language, focus upon the Chinese environment, emphasis upon structural grammar, focus upon vocabulary, rhetorical modes of passages, exercise types, and skills emphasis. The major similarities are that all eight are reading translation texts, all emphasize vocabulary and sentence level grammar, and all defer to the needs of China and its students. These similarities may be due to the belief of Chinese scholars that there is a need for Chinese specific ESP materials. There are fewer differences than similarities among the texts. The differences are in terms of selection and gradation of grammatical items, vocabulary choices, topic appeal and categories, and use of visuals. (RW)

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Some Comments on the Nature of Chinese ESP Coursebooks

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Abstract

The main purpose of this article is to provide an examination of some ESP coursebooks compiled by writers in the People's Republic of China for students in tertiary institutions. Common features from coursebooks include (1) use of reading passages, (2) reliance upon Chinese language, (3) focus upon the Chinese environment, (4) emphasis upon structural grammar and vocabulary items, and (5) exercise types and emphasis upon reading skills. Differences among texts are in (1) selection and gradation of grammatical and vocabulary items, (2) topic appeal and categories, and (3) provision for review.

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Some Comments on the Nature of Chinese ESP Coursebooks

Ann M. Johns

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a widely known--though not always respected--term in the People's Republic of China, for most of the same reasons that it is known--and not always respected--in other nations of the world.

ESP courses abound; in Shanghai, for example, twenty-one of the twenty-four institutions of higher learning offer classes for students specializing in subjects as varied as drama, medicine and railroad engineering. Most ESP is EST, however, since 80 percent of all Chinese college students are in science and technology (Liu 1981). Although some of the coursebooks chosen for these ESP classes are foreign (e.g., Herbert 1965), most are compiled by Chinese teachers of EFL. Narrow-angled (i.e., subject-specific) coursebooks are often compiled by the staff of the institute where they are assigned; more generalized, wide-angled coursebooks are usually written by the staff at the ESP centers, at Shanghai's Jiao Tung University or Chingwa University, in Beijing.

Among many ESP experts in China, there is a strong feeling that the country should continue to produce its own materials rather than use coursebooks from abroad. At the First International ESP Conference at Jiao Tung in March, 1981, Liu Zuwei, the chair of the university's English Department said:

> Although every year, a great number of EST coursebooks are compiled abroad, nothing has been designed to be adapted to China's special situation, to meet the needs of millions of Chinese students of science.

According to Mr. Liu, these needs include the role of the Chinese language in second language learning, the "psychological processes that lie beneath the Chinese linguistic structures and patterns," and the uses of translation. Mr. Liu appears to voice an interest of the Ministry of Education, which is encouraging the production of curricula eventually resulting in national ESP standards and a national examination.

Perhaps because of the nature of the self-contained unit in China, most foreign experts with whom I spoke during the 1981-82 academic year seemed unaware of the extensive ESP materials production there--and, as they produced curricula for their Chinese students, unaware of the considerations which Chinese scholars believe must be part of the planning for any ESP curriculum.

It is the purpose of this article, then, to provide an introduction to ESP materials in China by presenting an examination of eight Chinese-compiled coursebooks, focusing upon their common features and those characteristics which distinguish them from another. All of these coursebooks are presently being used in institutions of higher learning in Shanghai and elsewhere. Seven are in English for Science and Technology; the eighth is a business correspondence text from the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Trade.

COMMON FEATURES

Reading Passages

Each of the eight coursebooks contains reading passages of some type, usually in the initial section of a unit or chapter. In the EST coursebooks, the passages vary in length from 150-1,000 words, depending upon the proficiency level targeted. Some of the more advanced coursebooks include one central passage upon which exercises, glossary and the unit

title are based, and supplementary passages appearing toward the end of the unit which are related topically to the central passage.

Reliance upon Chinese Language

Chinese appears in all of the coursebooks but the business correspondence text. In some cases, it is employed for translation of all or part of the reading passages or for discussion of how various parts of the passage(s) should be translated. It appears frequently in post-passage notes on the grammar or vocabulary of the passage. It also appears in exercise instructions or in supplementary notes on the exercises. Chinese is the language of translation, and of explanation and discussion of points of grammar, vocabulary or discourse.

Focus upon the Chinese Environment

In every coursebook, there is evidence of the effort on the part of the authors to serve the needs of China and to present information or vocabulary with which both student and Chinese leadership are comfortable. Dialogues often begin with "Good morning, Comrades." The common use of status identification appears in fill-in-the-blanks exercises:

I am a (worker)
He is a (peasant)
He is a (scientist).

Chinese cities, landmarks and repositories of national pride are used as examples in a number of instances. The structure of the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall is discussed in the architecture text, for example.

Stories or themes from Chinese folklore, opera or history are topics in the passages from more elementary texts and in the supplementary

readings of more advanced coursebooks. "The Story of the Norman Bethune" and the "Three Blind Men and the Elephant" are examples of the stories which commonly appear.

The future experience of the students in the Chinese context is also used. In the business correspondence text, for example, China National Import and Export is the source or recipient of sample correspondence.

Emphasis upon Structural Grammar

In most cases, the approach to grammar is a structural one--or a combination of structural and traditional. Emphasis is upon sentence-level study of parts of speech in the surface structure. In this context, there are some exercises in language use, such as a section on the uses of "it" in scientific English. The sentence patterning and patterning boxes common in structural grammar texts are often employed.

Focus upon Vocabulary

It is clear that throughout these texts, the acquisition of vocabulary is one of the most important aims. One third to one eighth of each text is devoted to glossary, generally consisting of an English word and a Chinese translation. A number of exercises and explanations are devoted to different uses of a single word, depending upon context. For example, in one text, the term "worth" is explained in Chinese, followed by two English sentences:

(1) The book is worth two yuan (translation in Chinese)

(2) The book is worth reading (translation in Chinese)

Words are discussed in context, in isolation and in semantic juxtaposition (see 1 and 2). There are also exercises in word formations with questions

such as the following:

> The binary system can be made _____ to the conditions of an electric circuit. (correspond/corresponding/to correspond)

Rhetorical Modes of Passages

In the business correspondence coursebook, letters and other types of correspondence are the reading passages, so mode is not an issue. But in the EST texts, where reading passages are introduced each chapter, there are certain similarities among the types of modes chosen.

At all levels, there are descriptions of physical processes and physical structures, sometimes accompanied by diagrams, pictures or illustrations. (Diagrams appear in the advanced coursebooks; pictures in the elementary.) Instruction modes appear in those texts relating to experimentation (e.g., chemistry). But very few classification, concept/principle and theory/hypothesis texts appear, even at the highest levels. Narratives (e.g., "The Story of Norman Bethune"), dialogues and poems appear as supplementary readings or as central reading passages, especially at the elementary levels.

Exercise Types

There is variety in exercise type, especially in the more advanced texts, but there are some exercise types which appear in seven of the eight coursebooks. These include:

(1) Reading the passage aloud.

(2) Factual comprehension-type questions on the central reading passage.

(3) Fill in the blank with vocabulary chosen from a list or from the passage.

(4) Fill in the blank with the correct grammatical item.

(5) Translation of words of sentences.

(6) Identification of correct grammatical items, usually items from the same class (e.g., conjuncts) which can appear in the same environment (e.g., "and," "but," "or," "nor" and "for").

Skills Emphasis

Although in some of the more elementary texts there is emphasis upon pronunciation and the supra-segmantals, the coursebooks examined are basically for reading and translation. Dialogues, both open and closed, dictation and reading aloud are required at times, but the preponderance of exercises and discussion involve the readings. There are a few sentence-level writing exercises (e.g., paraphrase and sentence-combining) in the more advanced texts, but again, these are far out-numbered by the vocabulary, grammar and reading exercises and explanations.

DIFFERENCES

Seven of the eight coursebooks examined have much more in common than they have differences: all are reading translation texts, all emphasize vocabulary and sentence-level grammar, all defer to the needs of China and its students. However, there are some differences, some of which are of concern to those Chinese EFL experts who have suggested working toward a common EST syllabus.

Selection and Gradation of Grammatical Items

Most of these texts are grammar-based; that is, it is the grammar which controls the selection and gradation of items within the chapter and text. (An exception is the Jiao Tung series, which is vocabulary-based.) However, there does not seem to be one source for selection of the

grammatical items. All texts deal with "tenses"; the series deal with all of the tenses identified in structural grammar, with no particular tie between tense and discourse mode. The use of modals (e.g., "may" and "must") appear in three texts, attributive (i.e., relative) clauses appear in five. The use of the subjunctive in scientific discourse appears in four. Surprisingly, the passive does not commonly appear, nor do the passive/stative contrasts. The special EST uses of the definite article, of "be" and of demonstratives (see, e.g., Gopnik 1972) are not emphasized in any texts.

Vocabulary Choices

Although vocabulary is central to explanation and exercises in all of these coursebooks, there seems to be no common list from which the words chosen for discussion are drawn, even among wide-angle EST coursebooks. Words seem to be selected somewhat at random from the reading passages, as new words for students, rather than as (a) central to the passage, (b) from a designated list or (c) adhering to a sub-technical or technical dichotomy. (Note: Yang Huizhong and Huang Renjie of Jiao Tung are completing an EST computer-assisted word frequency study for EST which should soon have impact on EST curricula throughout China and change this random word choice situation.)

Topic Appeal and Topic Categories

As might be predicted, the more elementary lessons in texts have more appeal to the students. Topics such as "Abraham Lincoln," "Mr. Rocket" and the story of the "Three Blind Men and the Elephant" appear in lower level chapters. In narrow-angle coursebooks (e.g., architecture) topics are often limited to those which appear in the content courses ("Forces on

Structures," "Use of Steel in Reinforced Concrete"); wide-angle texts tend to emphasize the physical sciences and chemistry more than biological sciences.

Provision for Review of Grammatical and Vocabulary Items

This varies from text to text. Emphasis is more upon grammar than vocabulary review in texts where review exercises are provided.

Use of Visuals (e.g., pictures, illustrations, charts and diagrams)

This varies from no use of visuals to wide use for a number of purposes. Generally, visuals are employed for the following purposes:

(a) To illustrate linguistic points, especially pronunciation and sentence patterns

(b) To illustrate the text (i.e., to encourage interest in a topic)

(c) To accompany and enhance the discussion of the topic by visually representing the discussion in the passage (e.g., flow charts, diagrams).

I have discussed here some of the similarities and differences among ESP coursebooks compiled by Chinese and assigned to students in the institutions of higher education in China. The most widely discussed of the similarities, the reading-translation focus, the reliance upon Chinese and the needs of China and the Chinese student, may result from the belief of Chinese scholars in the necessity for Chinese-specific ESP materials. The principal differences, in selection and gradation of vocabulary and grammatical items, are also discussed by Chinese ESP

experts. These differences may narrow in the future, as the EST Computer-assisted Word Frequency Study is completed and micro-act categories such as Ewer's (1981) become better known.

In China, as well as in other non-English speaking nations (e.g., Japan) there is a growing interest in producing ESL/EFL coursebooks which meet the needs and learning strategies of the country's citizens. It appears that one of the principal responsibilities of the "foreign expert" in these countries is to be aware of and assist in this effort.

Coursebooks Examined:

Narrow Angle

Intermediate Reading in Medical English (Second Medical Institute, Shanghai, 1981)

Architecture (Beijing, Chingwa Foreign Language Research English Education Group, 1979)

Civil and Marine English (Higher Level) (Heinan University et al., 1979)

Business Correspondence (Institute of Foreign Trade, Shanghai, 1981)

Wide Angle

English, Book I (Shanghai Jiao Tung University, People's Education Press, 1979)

English for Science (Book 3) (Futan University and Shanghai Teachers College, 1979)

English (Books 1 and 2) (Futan University and Shanghai Teachers College, 1979)

Science Readings (Shanghai Translation Publishers, 1981)

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Gopnik, M. Linguistic Structures in Scientific Texts (The Hague, Mouton, 1972).

Herbert, D. The Structure of Technical English (Longman, 1965).

Liu Z. "How Should EST Be Taught in China?" Paper presented at the First International ESP Conference, Jiao Tung University, Shanghai, 1981.

The Author

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